**Planning a Read-Aloud to Meet the CCSS**

*…through current State Adopted Materials and Texts*

**PURPOSE:**

Students benefit from participating in rich, structured conversations with an adult in response to written texts that are read aloud, orally comparing and contrasting as well as analyzing and synthesizing. Children’s listening comprehension outpaces reading comprehension until the middle school years; it is important that kindergarteners build knowledge through being read to as well as through reading, with the balance gradually shifting to reading independently. Reading-aloud allows children to experience written language without the burden of decoding, granting them access to content they may not be able to read and understand by themselves. They are free to focus their mental energy on the words and ideas presented in the text, preparing them to tackle rich written content on their own later.

Reading aloud to children is recommended by professional organizations as a vehicle for building oral language and early literacy skills. Reading aloud is widely accepted as a means of developing vocabulary, particularly in young children. Wide reading is a powerful vehicle for vocabulary acquisition for older and more proficient readers, but since beginning readers are limited in their independent reading to simple decodable or familiar texts, exposure to novel vocabulary is unlikely to come from this source. Reading-aloud fills the gap by exposing children to book language, which is rich in unusual words and descriptive language. The effortless manner, in which skilled teachers conduct reading-aloud, masks the complexity of the pedagogical decisions that occur. Teachers must select appropriate texts, identify words for instruction and choose strategies that facilitate word learning. This study (Reading Rockets) sheds light on the process.

**PLANNING:**

Read-alouds are instructional events and require the same advance planning as any other lesson. Advanced planning will decrease confusions, use time efficiently, and ultimately increase student learning. Books should be selected with vocabulary in mind, be previewed and practiced. Teachers should select target words in advance and plan instructional support based on those particular words. To crease word learning potential, the following five steps are recommended:

1. *Identify words for instruction.* To maximize learning, words targeted for instruction should be identified in advance. Examine the text for words that are essential for comprehension or words that are generally useful for students to know and are likely to encounter with some frequency in their reading. These words might be rich, descriptive and novel to students and usually not encountered in everyday conversation.
2. *Consider the type of word learning required.* Does the target word represent a new label for something familiar or an unfamiliar concept, or is it a familiar word used in a new way? Is the word critical for comprehension? These questions determine the appropriate level of instruction (incidental, embedded, or focused); whether instruction should occur before, during or after reading; and strategy selection.
3. *Identify appropriate strategies.*  Select strategies that are consistent with your instructional goals. When the novel word represents a new label for a familiar term, a synonym or gesture may be adequate. Providing examples and questioning might be used to develop a new concept prior to reading, with a simple definition included during the reading to reinforce learning. Instructional strategies include: questioning, providing a definition, providing a synonym, providing examples, clarifying or correcting student responses, extending a student-generated definition, labeling, imagery, and morphemic analysis.
4. *Have a Plan B.* If a strategy proves ineffective, be prepared to intervene quickly and provide correction or clarification. Have an easy-to-understand definition ready. Be able to provide a synonym or an example.
5. *Infuse the words into the classroom.* Find opportunities for the new words to be used in other contexts to encourage authentic use and deepen word learning. The key to students remembering new words is multiple exposures.

Teachers also preplan the questions they will use during read-alouds to ensure the development of their students’ abilities to think as they read. Below is a list of criteria to use when planning questions. Do the questions in the teacher’s guide and my own pre-planned questions, ensure my students will:

* 1. Identify and recall information? (understands the need for evidence)
  2. Organize, select and understand facts and ideas?
  3. Use facts, rules and principles in new situations? (apply)
  4. Take information apart and look for relationships? (analysis)
  5. Bring ideas together to create new patterns? (synthesis)
  6. Make judgments or be able to explain how a passage supports an idea? (evaluate)

Do my read-alouds/think-alouds, model the standards for students?

For example, during a read-aloud does the teacher:

* Ask and answer questions about key details in a text;
* Retell familiar stories, including key details.
* Identify characters, setting and major events in a story.
* Ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.
* Recognize and name common types of texts (e.g., storybooks, poems)
* Name the author, illustrator and defining the role of each in telling the story;
* Describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g. what moment in a story an illustration depicts);
* Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories;

The above are examples of possible objectives for the read-aloud portion of class time. Using post-it notes is an excellent way for teachers to record preplanned questions to use during the read-aloud. The post it may be placed in the text at the appropriate spot to pause and use the question. Additional purposes and possible objectives for the read-aloud may be found in the next section about vocabulary instruction.

**PICTURES**

Very young children come to the understanding across time that the “print carries the message” not the pictures. The pictures and illustrations are sources of additional meaning, but reading is about the words. Beck and McKeown make this point:

“….during our observations we became very aware of how children often ignored the linguistic

content and relied on pictures to respond to questions about a story. Thus, as we developed

initial questions, we were alert to how children might use the content of pictures. There

were two situations in which we deliberately decided to wait to show pictures until after

reading and discussion of a story portion.

One situation was when pictures mirrored the linguistic content of a text. For example, in

the story *The Wolf’s Chicken Stew* (Kasza. 1987), after a wolf has been following a chicken,

the text reads: “The wolf crept closer. But just as he was about to grab his prey….” The

picture on this page shows the wolf on his hind feet about to pounce on the chicken. We

wanted children to talk about what was happening in the story at that point, so we posed

the question “What’s happening?” If the children saw the picture as they were being asked

that question, they certainly would ignore the linguistic content and respond just from the

visual. Because we wanted them to construct their idea from the text language, we did

not show the picture until the students had responded.

Another potential problematic situation with pictures was when the content of pictures

was in conflict with what was going on in the text. For example, in *The Bremen-Town*

*Musicians* (Plume, 1980) there is a section in which a dog is explaining to a donkey that he

has run away because his master planned to shoot him. The donkey then suggests that the

dog join him, and they leave for Bremen Town. The picture, however, shows the dog hiding

behind a tree and a man with a rifle in his hand looking for him. This illustration represents

part of the story that the dog was relaying to the donkey. But the idea that builds the plot of

the story is that the dog and the donkey have joined forces and are on their way to Bremen

Town. The vividness of the picture could well lead children to misunderstand what was

happening in the story at that point. Thus, we posed the question, “What’s going on?” and

elicited responses before showing the picture.”

**VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION AND READ-ALOUDS**

The read-aloud portion of instruction is an opportunity to help students acquire and use new words. There is a very strong relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension. Having a weak vocabulary will impede reading comprehension and vocabulary grows larger and richer through wide reading and reading with comprehension. Since it is not possible for children to gain a literate vocabulary learning words one by one, they need an awareness of how word meanings work. Reading aloud provides a powerful context for word learning. Books chosen for read-alouds are typically engaging, thus increasing both children’s motivation and attention, and the likelihood that novel words will be learned. As teachers read, they draw students’ attention to the high frequency words of mature language users. These words can have a powerful effect on verbal functioning and are less common in everyday conversation, but appear with high frequency in written language, making them ideal for instruction during read-alouds. Common, everyday words such as *car*  and *house*, are acquired in everyday language experiences, seldom requiring instruction.

During read aloud interactions, word learning occurs both incidentally and as the teacher stops and elaborates on particular words to provide explanation, demonstration, or example. Even brief explanations of one or two sentences, when presented in the context of supportive text, can be sufficient for children to make initial connections between novel words and their meanings. Word learning is enhanced through repeated readings of text, which provide opportunities to revise and refine word meanings. These repetitions help students move to deeper levels of word knowledge from *never heard it,* to *sounds familiar,* to *it has something to do with,* to *well known.*

**ADULT MEDIATION IN READ-ALOUDS**

The style of read-aloud interaction is significant to vocabulary growth, with reading styles that encourage child participation outperforming verbatim readings. Simply put, “the way books are shared with children matters.” High quality read-alouds are characterized by adult mediation. Effective teachers weave in questions and comments as they read, creating a conversation between the children, the text, and the teacher. To facilitate word learning, teachers employ a variety of strategies such as elaboration of student responses, naming, questioning and labeling.

Analysis of the literature on vocabulary learning through read-alouds leads to two conclusions. First, adult mediation facilitates word learning. Researchers concluded, “there are repeated findings that encouraging vocabulary acquisition in the primary grades using repeated reading combined with word meaning explanations works.” Second, the relative effectiveness of different types of mediation remains less clear. Adult explanations are clearly linked to greater word learning, but it is not evident which aspects of the explanations are the critical components: the context, a paraphrased sentence, or even the child’s interest in the story. It is also possible that active involvement in discussions is more salient than the type of questions posed. Levels of instruction in vocabulary can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Categories of Instructional Focus for Vocabulary Instruction during Read-Alouds

Read alouds can be viewed as microcosms of balanced instruction. This balance does not result from adherence to a prescribed formula, but rather from countless decisions made by teachers. These instructional decisions affect the balance of direct and incidental instruction, between planning in advance and seizing the teachable moment, the quantity and quality of vocabulary instruction within the read-alouds, and ultimately student learning. Teachers’ perceptions of an appropriate balance are evident in their uses of read-alouds, styles of reading, text selection, and in the way that vocabulary is developed.

The Common Core State Standards call for students to:

1. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *kindergarten reading and content.*
   1. Identify new meanings for familiar words and apply them accurately (e.g., knowing *duck* is a bird and learning the verb to *duck).*
   2. Use the most frequently occurring inflections and affixes (e.g., -ed, -s, -re, un-, pre-, -ful, -less) as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word.
2. With guidance and support from adults, explore word relationships and nuances in word meanings.
   1. Sort common objects into categories to gain a sense of the concepts the categories represent.
   2. Demonstrate understanding of frequently occurring verbs and adjectives by relating them to their opposites (antonyms).
   3. Identify real-life connections between words and their use (e.g., note places at school that are *colorful*).
   4. Distinguish shades of meaning among verbs describing the same general action (e.g., *walk, march, strut, prance)* by acting out the meanings.
3. Use words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to, and responding to texts.

A specific example of the above would be for students (with guidance and support from adults) to learn to work with adjectives including:

* using adjectives to describe clearly and listen discerningly;
* using and understanding concatenated adjectives (adjectives linked together, united in a series or chain): the red square, the large, red square, the large, red square with no stripes;
* attending to the shades of meanings between adjective cousins (e.g. happy-sad; cool-cold-frigid; thin, scrawny, narrow);
* expanding sentences by adding adjectives, especially to the subject clause.

**WHAT MAKES READ-ALOUDS SUCCESSFUL?**

Teachers must bear in mind the distinction between constructing meaning of ideas in a text and simply retrieving information from a text. The teacher designs questions that encourage children to talk about and connect ideas and develops follow-up questions that scaffold and help children build meaning from those ideas. Initial questions may not elicit meaningful responses from young children. Yet simply asking more questions will not necessary prompt richer responses. Thus Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown emphasize with teachers how to follow up children’s initial responses in productive ways. First, teachers might repeat and rephrase what children are saying. This both encourages more elaborated language and invites other children to connect to the ideas that are being discussed. This approach of following up children’s responses confirms findings from several studies. Researchers found that 5-year-old children’s talk was more likely extended when preceded by teacher repetition and rephrasing of what students had said; others found that teachers who employed uptake-incorporating previous student responses into subsequent questions-had a strong positive effect on students’ understanding of literature.

Another approach to following up children’s initial responses includes using generic probes that prompted them to explain: “What’s that all about?” “What’s that mean?” Researchers found that when children had difficulty responding to a probe it was useful to reread the relevant portion of the text and repeat the initial question. This helped student’s focus on the text language as the source for their responses. Even with all of this support, it takes time for students to expand their abilities to construct meaning from decontextualized language.

**SOURCES:**

The Common Core State Standards

*Text Talk: Capturing the Benefits of Read-aloud Experiences for Young Children*, by Isabel L. Beck and Margaret G. McKeown, The Reading Teacher, Volume 55, No. 1, September 2001

*Vocabulary Development During Read-Alouds: Primary Practices,* by Karen J. Kindle, READINGrockets, 2009. <http://www.readingrockets.org>